

Case report

Commemorative tattoos as markers for anniversary reactions and suicide



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 December 2013

Accepted 25 February 2014

Available online 7 March 2014

Keywords:

Suicide

Tattoo

Anniversary reaction

Commemorative

ABSTRACT

Anniversary reactions include physical and/or psychiatric responses to the anniversary of the death of a person who was significant to the decedent. In the most extreme cases this may result in suicide. Two cases of suicide are reported to demonstrate the association with specific commemorative tattoos. Case 1: A 19-year-old man was found hanging by the neck by an electric flex in a shed. A commemorative tattoo had the name of his brother who had committed suicide by hanging in the same shed 9 years and 2 days previously. Case 2: A 47-year-old woman was found hanging by the neck by a rope attached to a metal beam in a shed at her home address. A commemorative tattoo had the name of her daughter who had committed suicide by hanging in the same shed 1 year and 5 days previously. Tattooing may record significant life events and so may be useful in a forensic context in helping to identify an unknown decedent. In cases of apparent suicide, correlating the details of a tattoo at autopsy with the available history or the date of death may also provide useful information that helps to clarify reasons for the event, as well as providing data on the incidence of significant anniversary reactions involving lethal self harm.

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1. Introduction

Tattooing is becoming an increasingly popular form of body decoration in Western countries. In addition to designs and images, tattoos may record events such as births, marriages and deaths within a decedent's family or among friends.^{1,2} The occurrence of two suicides on the anniversary of deaths of close family members is reported where it was noted at autopsy that the victims had commemorative tattoos with the names and date of death (in one case) of deceased family members. Commemorative tattoos may, therefore, provide an insight into such deaths.

2. Material and methods

A prospective study was undertaken at Forensic Science SA (FSSA) by the author for cases where commemorative tattoos were associated with suicide over a 15 year period from 1998 to 2013. FSSA provides autopsy services to the South Australian State

Coroner covering a population of approximately 1.6 million. Two cases were identified.

3. Case reports

3.1. Case 1

A 19-year-old male was found hanging by the neck by an electric flex in a shed. The body was kneeling on the floor, leaning forward. At autopsy a parchment ligature mark was present around the neck running upwards and backwards from a position immediately below the thyroid cartilage. The suspension point was on the right side of the occiput. Occasional conjunctival petechiae were present in keeping with low suspension hanging and the tongue was protruding between the teeth with parchmenting of the tip. No other significant injuries were noted and there were no underlying organic diseases present, which could have caused or contributed to death. Non-toxic levels of morphine and diazepam were in keeping with a history of recreational opiate and benzodiazepine usage. Death was due to suicidal hanging.

Also noted was a heart shaped tattoo on the left shoulder with a name and "RIP" (Fig. 1). Review of the history showed that the name

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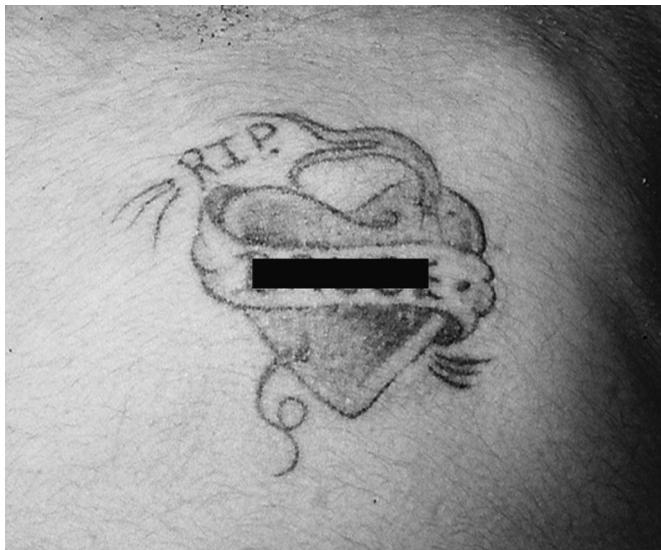


Fig. 1. A commemorative tattoo with a heart design on the shoulder of a 19-year-old man who was found hanging by the neck by an electric flex in a shed. The name of his brother (blacked out) with her birth and death dates can be seen. Her daughter had committed suicide by hanging in the same shed 9 years and 2 days previously and "RIP" can be seen.

was that of the decedent's brother who had committed suicide by low suspension hanging in the same shed 9 years and 2 days previously. His brother's autopsy had also been performed at FSSA.

3.2. Case 2

A 47-year-old female was found hanging by the neck by a rope attached to a metal beam in a shed at her home address. There was a past history of previous suicide attempts with suicidal thoughts and farewells posted on social media. At autopsy a parchmented ligature mark was present running upwards and backwards around the neck to a suspension point posteriorly. There was a fracture of the left superior horn of the thyroid cartilage in keeping with neck compression from the ligature. No other significant injuries were noted and there were no underlying organic diseases present, which could have caused or contributed to death. Therapeutic concentrations of citalopram, diazepam and promethazine were detected on toxicological evaluation of blood with an alcohol level of 0.264%. Death was due to suicidal hanging.

Also noted was a tattoo in the right iliac fossa with a female name and presumed birth and death dates (Fig. 2). Review of the history showed that the name was that of the decedent's daughter who had committed suicide by hanging in the same shed 1 year and 5 days previously. Her daughter's autopsy had also been performed at FSSA.

4. Discussion

Tattooing has had a long history in many communities whereby certain individuals were marked, either voluntarily or against their will, with indelible inks. The technique involves the introduction of pigmented material into the subcutaneous tissues.^{1,2} Voluntary tattooing is undertaken for a variety of reasons ranging from simple decorative purposes to demonstrating membership of groups such as motor cycle or street gangs, or the armed forces. Illicit drug users may choose designs that include marijuana leaves or syringes to show their drug of choice. Political or religious symbolism may also be depicted.^{1,2}

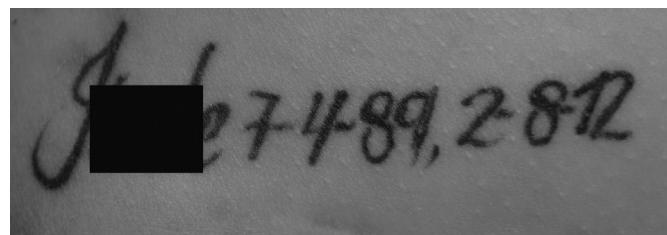


Fig. 2. A commemorative tattoo on the abdomen of a 47-year-old woman who was found hanging by the neck by a rope attached to a metal beam in a shed at her home address. Her daughter's name (blacked out) with her birth and death dates can be seen. Her daughter had committed suicide by hanging in the same shed 1 year and 5 days previously.

More recently, fine line tattoos have been used to portray the faces of family members with dates commemorating significant events such as births or marriages. Deaths of friends or family members may also be chronicled, with the names and dates of deaths added to designs or special verse. One form of commemorative tattoo involves mixing the tattoo ink with cremation ash from the departed loved one.¹

In a forensic context tattoos may be extremely useful in helping to establish the identity of an unknown body or to give some indication of the cultural, ethnic or occupational background of a decedent. This may be of practical significance if many bodies are being examined over a short period of time, such as during major disaster victim identification and management activities. Tattoos amongst Russian prisoners may provide a chronicle of their life history, and an example of a tattoo that suggests an association with Australia is one which depicts a local folk hero, Ned Kelly, with his alleged last words of "such is life".³

Anniversary reactions refer to physical and psychiatric disorders that are precipitated by the anniversary of the death of a significant person. They may occur many years after the event and may be manifested in the most extreme form by suicide.⁴ Despite being recognized for decades the actual prevalence of anniversary reactions is unknown.⁵ Similarly, while much is known about varying methodologies and precipitating factors for suicide among different age and ethnic groups,^{6,7} the precise incidence of suicides precipitated by anniversary reactions is also uncertain.

The current report provides clear evidence of significant anniversaries commemorated by tattoos associated with two cases of suicide that presented for medicolegal autopsy, one occurring many years after the initial death. Given that detailed background family and psychological histories, and suicide notes, are often not provided to pathologists at the time of forensic autopsies, careful evaluation of the written content of tattoos may provide useful information. Correlating information in tattoos with any available history and the date of death may, therefore, be a method for identifying possible anniversary suicides that may otherwise not have been recognized. This information may clarify reasons for a particular suicide, in addition to providing data on the incidence of significant anniversary reactions in a forensic context.

Ethical approval

Forensic Science SA.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

None.

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